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Synagogue Empty by Chance

By Paul G. Edwards
Washington Post Staff Writer

The Prince George's County synagogue that was shattered by a high explosive bomb Saturday night would normally have been occupied by children at the time of the blast, leaders of the congregation said yesterday.

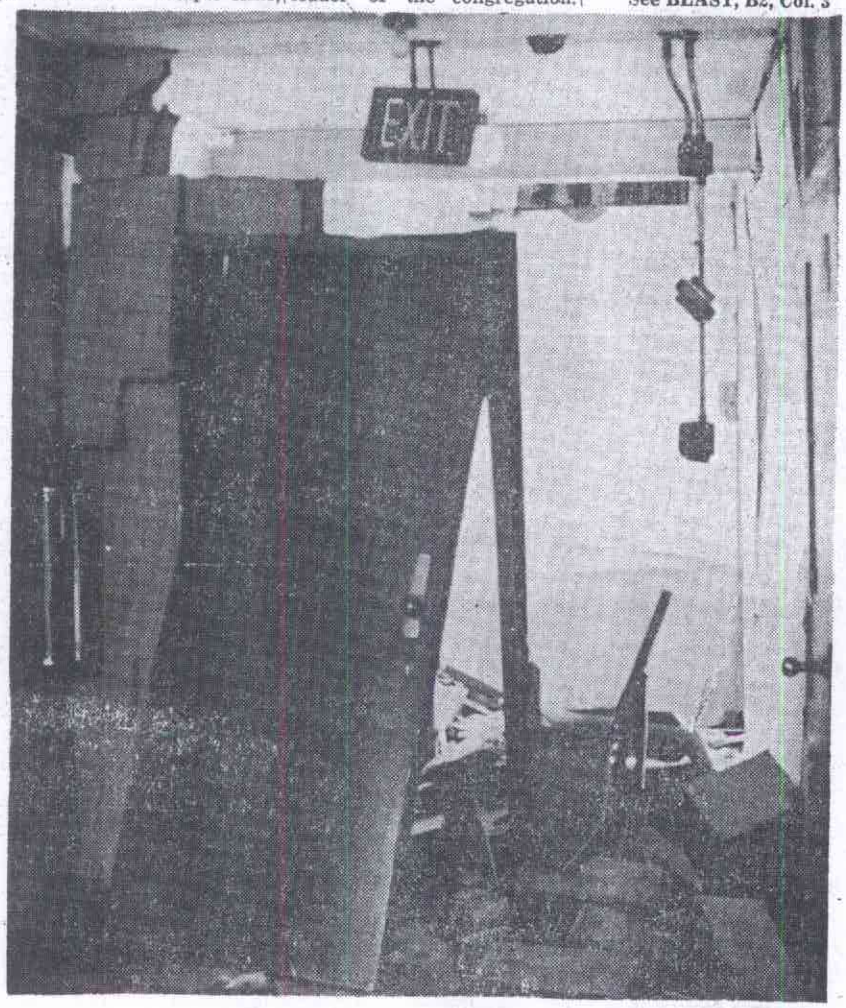
The explosion at Shaare Tikyah Synagogue, 5404 Old Temple Hills rd. in Temple Hills, knocked a hole in a prestressed concrete floor, blew out three heavy metal doors and sent debris flying across a social activities room in which the youth of the congregation had planned to hold a dance Saturday night.

"Because of the flu they went instead to a smaller party at a private home," said Robert Chernoff, spiritual leader of the congregation. "Had they been in the social activities room, it would have been a slaughter."

A team of four County detectives, assisted by the FBI and Army ordnance specialists, reported on leads yesterday in their investigation of the blast.

Police said a "high explosive charge of undetermined type" was placed on the floor of a

See BLAST, B2, Col. 3



By Harry Naltchayan—The Washington Post

Door to basement classroom hangs precariously after explosion at synagogue.

By Harry Naltchayan—The Washington Post

Firemen haul out debris from the synagogue's damaged kitchen. Blast tore off doors.

BLAST, From B1

short passageway between the social room and the kitchen.

Heavy duty steel doors leading to the kitchen and to an outside stairway were blown out. The force of the blast drove fittings on the doors through stainless steel kitchen equipment, leaving gaping holes.

Shock waves from the blast reached the basement classroom area by way of an open stairway from the social room, officials said. In the basement, another steel door to the stairway was blown down, concrete block walls were buckled and a heating equipment room directly beneath the explosion was filled with rubble.

Joseph E. Bartell, head of the County's department of inspections and permits, estimated damage to the 15-month-old building at more than $150,000.

Although the damage was severe, the worst of it was confined to the rear of the synagogue and Bartell said it should be ready for use by next weekend. The sanctuary is in the front of the building, separated from the social room by a folding partition.

Mr. Chernoff said he has received "many calls" from Christian churches in the Temple Hills area volumteering use of facilities for the 175-family congregation until the synagogue can be used again.

Police reported finding no signs of forcible entry into the locked building and no notes.

Members of the congregation said that a group of teenaged boys entered the kitchen through a skylight last fall and broke into a supply of sacramental wine. It was speculated that the same skylight was used in placing the explosives.

Mr. Chernoff said that there had been no threats or acts of vandalism against the synagogue before Saturday. He said one member of the congregation has been harassed by pranks at his home recently, but added, "There is no way to know if this is related."